

## **Focus Group Research and TV Comedy Audiences<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article reflects on some aspects of the use of a focus group approach to study audience engagement with TV comedy. Drawing on empirical data, it focuses on the conflict between the serious discourse of academia and the humorous discourse of TV comedy. The discussion contrasts descriptions of 'naturally occurring' TV comedy talk with the analytical discussion encouraged within the focus groups, and highlights that participants often undermined the seriousness of academia through the use of verbal humour. By focusing on how participants negotiated the research setting, the article helps address the under-researched area of TV comedy audiences, as well as the need for reflection on methodological issues in qualitative audience studies.

**Key words:** Television, comedy, humour, methodology, qualitative audience research, focus groups.

This article reflects on the use of focus groups to research audience engagement with TV comedy. The research was conducted as part of a project on the roles of gender and nationality in audience engagement with TV comedy, but my key concern here is to examine the relationship between methodology and research topic. Thus, while I do consider some of the findings of the project, that analysis is framed by reflections on the research approach. The paper contributes to the under-researched area of TV comedy audiences, but also responds to a call for discussion of methodology within qualitative audience research (e.g., Höijer 2008). Reflecting on my own approach, I underline the importance of considering how participant negotiations of focus group dynamics may impact on research data.

As Mulkay (1988: 178) notes, studies of humour in everyday social situations 'are critical to an understanding of humour as a social phenomenon'. But what are the challenges of conducting 'serious' research on humour and comedy? This article uses the

term 'humour' to refer to a particular discursive mode that is designed to encourage amusement (Mulkey 1988: 17). Building on this definition, 'comedy' is seen to mean a cultural text that adopts such a humorous mode or 'tone' (Mills 2005: 16). Examining data collected through a series of 25 focus groups held in Norway and Britain in 2006, I highlight some of the ways in which the sustained, analytical discussions encouraged by the focus group moderators differed from participant descriptions of 'naturally occurring' talk about TV comedy, such as the re-performance of catch-phrases. I argue that the academic concerns driving my research strove to push TV comedy from 'the realm of humour' and into 'the realm of serious discourse' (Mulkey 1988: 21-3). However, participants often undermined the seriousness of academia by adopting a humorous discursive mode, and focus group discussions shifted between these two realms.

My perspective on the research context draws on Kitzinger and Barbour's discussion of focus group methodology:

Crucially, group work explores how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms. Indeed, depending on the researcher's theoretical approach, focus group data can go further and challenge the notion that opinions are attributes of subjects at all rather than utterances produced in specific situations ... (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999: 5)

My analysis sees the focus groups as 'situated communication activities in which we can examine language, thinking and knowledge in action' (Marková et al. 2007: 2). It is based on the moderate social constructionist assumption that I, as the researcher, can only offer my own interpretation of the 'realities' that were constructed through focus group discussions. I believe that these may 'at least partly reflect an external reality', but I acknowledge that I am unable to assess the extent of this connection (Höijer 2008: 278).

### **My focus group research**

My focus group approach aimed to generate comparable data by using a set list of questions, but it also strove to promote participant interaction by inviting group members to comment on each other's responses. To facilitate a comfortable discussion environment, I used relatively small group sizes and I encouraged each of my respondents to form their own group of three to six participants by recruiting friends, colleagues or family members. This strategy has previously been used by Jhally and Lewis (1992: 10) in their audience study of *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984-1992), where they note: 'In an informal setting, conversation could be allowed at appropriate moments to flow freely without interruption by the interviewer'. Another potential benefit of this group composition is that participants might perform identities more similar to those they performed in that group in other contexts. Reflecting on a focus group study of perceptions of AIDS, Kitzinger notes:

The fact that research participants already knew each other had the additional advantage that friends and colleagues could relate each other's comments to actual incidents in their shared daily lives. They often challenged each other on contradictions between what they were *professing* to believe and how they actually behaved... (Kitzinger 1994: 105)

Such incidents also occurred in my groups, and they sometimes created interesting discursive contradictions that I have highlighted in my analysis. However, some of my respondents stated that they preferred to be placed in a group, rather than forming their own, often explaining that they would have difficulty persuading any friends to come along. I was concerned that including individual participants within pre-existing groups might marginalise them in the discussion, and I therefore tried to organise three British groups and three Norwegian groups in which none of the participants knew each other. This intention was partly undermined in half of these groups, where some of the participants turned out to know each other from before. In groups five and twenty-two, these instances were accidental, while twenty-one-year-old Ivy in group nineteen brought along her friend Lotte without informing me beforehand. During the discussion, Lotte only participated by giving very brief responses to direct questions, and I would guess that she primarily came along to keep Ivy company.

The study comprised thirteen focus groups conducted in Britain and twelve run in Norway<sup>2</sup>. It had a total of ninety-seven participants who were mostly white and middle-class. One potential benefit associated with targeting middle class viewers is the idea that if the moderator shares certain social variables with the participants, this might help to adjust the asymmetrical power structure produced by the research setting and make participants feel more comfortable. In her study of female *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004) fans, Jermyn considers this issue in relation to her university-based recruitment strategies:

The potential restriction of this audience-research method is demonstrated by the fact that most of my respondents' social profiles were so obviously similar to my own. Though this brings with it limitations, in this instance it was to some degree a desirable outcome. While the position of 'researcher' seems inevitably and indelibly endowed with a certain sense of privilege within the focus-group context, it certainly was not the case, as in much previous feminist audience research, that there was a marked disparity regarding class, education or status between us. (Jermyn 2004: 206)

The full age range of my participants was seventeen to fifty-nine. This included thirteen teenagers, sixty participants who were in their twenties, twenty who were in their thirties, two in their forties and two in their fifties. The average (mean) age was 26.6. The British focus groups included twenty-five men and twenty-three women, while the Norwegian groups were similarly made up of twenty-four men and twenty-five women. In addition to

grouping participants according to nationality, I also ran series of all-male, all-female and mixed-sex focus groups. I chose to use both single-sex and mixed-sex groups based primarily on the assumption that participants might respond differently to these settings in discussions around gender and comedy. As Marková *et al.* (2007: 49) argue, focus group speakers have 'different social identities and may talk from different positions'. Stewart *et al.* (2006: 28) suggest that there may be greater conformity of opinion in mixed-sex groups than in single-sex groups because participants then place more importance on civility. In my research, I have instead identified this difference when comparing focus group data from pre-existing groups with more polite groups of strangers.

Considering participant/participant interaction and the ethical responsibilities of the researcher, Michell (1999) argues:

Focus groups can facilitate the exploration of mutual experiences and identities ... but this is not necessarily the case. I urge researchers always at least to consider the voices which may be silenced in the particular group research settings they employ, particularly when working with 'captive populations' where research participants have on-going social relations which may be compromised by public disclosure. (Michell 1999: 36)

Issues of sensitivity and disclosure appeared to be less problematic in my research on TV comedy than they might be in some other areas, such as discussions around child abuse (eg., Kitzinger 2004) or mental illness (eg., Nicholson, Sweeney and Geller 1998). However, sometimes the group context clearly marginalised dissenting views, and I have highlighted examples of this in my analysis. I also consider examples of interpersonal use of humour, and discuss what such interaction might tell us about focus group dynamics. I am here particularly interested in how 'supportive' and 'contestive' styles of humour (Holmes 2006: 28) were used to construct boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable tastes and practices. As Holmes (2006: 33) notes: 'Put simply, supportive contributions agree with, add to, elaborate, or strengthen the propositions or arguments of previous contribution(s), while contestive contributions challenge, disagree with, or undermine the propositions or arguments put forward in earlier contributions'.

It is important to emphasise that this is a small-scale study with a narrow demographic focus on particular audience groups. When I have nevertheless decided to use numbers in my analysis of this data, this is not based on an assumption that my study has a wider quantitative validity. It is intended to clarify my discussion and highlight a diversity of perspectives within the focus groups. With the consent of all participants, the focus groups were recorded, transcribed and subsequently coded with the help of qualitative analysis software NVivo. The anonymity of participants has been protected through the use of pseudonyms.

## Discussing TV comedy

When asked if they ever talked about TV comedy with family members, friends or colleagues, seventy-six out of ninety-seven participants responded affirmatively. Only five participants – three women and two men – said that they never or hardly ever talked about comedy. However, the value that viewers attached to this talk varied greatly. Some participants constructed it as a key part of conversations with friends, some described it as a way of conversing with colleagues who they may not have much else in common with, and others dismissed it as something they only did very occasionally and had little interest in. The following extract is from a group of male British viewers. In contrast to most of my groups, these participants had never met each other before:

Moderator: Um, do you ever talk about comedies that you've seen or heard of with, sort of, colleagues or friends or family?

Jake: Yeah.

Steve: Yeah.

Max: [clears his throat] Quite a lot.

[laughter]

Moderator: Anything in particular that you tend to talk about or?

Max: At the moment I watch I'm watching *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, I talk quite a lot about that. Some of the scenarios especially because they're so cringe worthy

Jake: [interruption] [laughs]

Max: they make quite good discussion points. People often say 'oh, that's something that's happened to me', which makes it quite interesting.

Moderator: So you talk about it with other people who've seen it?

Max: Um not necessarily. I might recommend it to someone and give them a few examples of the sort of sort of scenarios that come up, give them a taste of what it's like.

(Group five, British male strangers, aged twenty-three to forty-one)

The brevity of the initial responses to my question could be seen as a resistance to the kind of in-depth analysis that I encouraged in the focus group. It could also be seen as a response to a social setting in which the participants had never met before and had yet to establish norms around acceptable practices and tastes. The exchange took place early on in the focus group and could be read as a negotiation of group dynamics, in which Max signalled his intention of responding by clearing his throat, and his subsequent verbal response was approved by his fellow participants through laughter.

In addition to Max, four other men and one woman also described recommending comedy series to friends, in the hope of getting other viewers to discuss them with. This highlights the value that these six participants attached to discussions of comedy series, suggesting that the talk was not only enjoyable in itself, but that it was also an important

part of their engagement with the show. This can be related to Jenkins's (1992: 45) ethnographic study of film and TV fans, where he argues that discussions with fellow fans form an important part of textual interpretations, functioning to 'expand the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption'. However, within the focus group setting, descriptions of comedy recommendations also displayed cultural competency and constructed speakers as experienced viewers who shared their knowledge with fellow members of the figured world of TV comedy audiences. This contributed to the articulation of relational identities, as illustrated by this exchange from a group of female, Norwegian friends:

Moderator: Um do you ever talk about comedy series that you have seen or heard of?

Karoline: I don't watch much television, but I do notice that the others always want to talk about 'oh, now I've seen this and that episode' and then they'll talk about that for half an hour and it's [inaudible] because 'oh my God, it's on TV'.

Stine: But Karoline

Karoline: [interruption] But I do talk a lot about *The Simpsons*  
[Laughter]

Stine: You talk a lot about *The Simpsons*.

Karoline: But *The Simpsons* is good.

Moderator: But what do you talk about, then, when you talk about comedy series?

Karoline: *They* talk about  
[Laughter]

Karoline: what happened in this and that episode, and 'oh, what is going to happen afterwards' and stuff like that, but with *The Simpsons*, it's just [pause] it's just, it's more like I'll talk about an episode from a long time ago, 'this reminded me of that', and that is more a part of a [pause] life.

[Laughter]

(Group fifteen, Norwegian female friends, aged seventeen to eighteen)

Stine's challenge illustrates an advantage of using pre-existing groups, as she reminded Karoline of contradictions in her account of TV comedy talk in their friendship group. Karoline constructed her own talk about *The Simpsons* (FOX 1989-present) as superior to that of her friends, both because hers focused on a 'good' show, and because she related narrative elements to her own life instead of discussing narrative developments *within* the programme. Through these distinctions, she presented herself as a more discerning and sophisticated viewer than her friends, and staked a claim for 'expert' status in the focus group. The repeated laughter of the other participants could be seen to indicate that they

were already aware of Karoline's perception, and that they did not find it insulting because they did not share the criteria that she based these value judgements on.

Across the focus groups, participants also attributed a solidarity-building function to 'naturally occurring' talk about TV comedy. Five men and five women described such conversations as a way to bond with other people, presenting it both as a way to cement existing relationships and as a way to test potential friends. The following extract is from a group of female British friends:

Rachel: [interruption] Yeah. And I like it when everyone that you know likes the same thing

Sarah: [interruption] Yeah.

Rachel: as you do.

Sarah: You can talk about it. So that TV element is good, cos you can talk about it with people and stuff, cos they'll be watching it at the same time. Yeah. It's good. Like it always has to be, like, I dunno, a social thing as well, isn't it, like, it's nice when someone else finds it funny as well.

Cindy: Yeah.

Rachel: And I judge people if they don't find it funny.

Sarah: [laughs]

(Group ten, British female friends, aged twenty-five to twenty-seven)

Rachel's last statement could be seen as conversational humour that 'identifies or celebrates shared ideas, shared interests and other similarities between speakers' (Hay 2000: 719). However, in his study of *The Simpsons*, Gray (2006: 128) demonstrates that the focus on shared tastes in TV programmes can also exclude friends who fail to conform. This problem was brought up by Kate in focus group seven, and I will examine her account in more detail.

Kate belonged to the same friendship group as Cindy, Rachel and Sarah, but she participated in a focus group where none of the other participants knew her or the women in group ten. This environment seemed to enable Kate to discuss a problematic aspect of the significance that comedy had in her friendship group. Cindy, Rachel and Sarah all described themselves as fans of *The Mighty Boosh* (BBC3/BBC2 2004-present). However, Kate brought up a perceived negative effect of her failure to enjoy that programme:

Kate: [...] Um but my friends love it so [pause] I feel, like [laughing] totally left out because I wanna like it, you know! So I actually got [inaudible] and borrowed the DVD and I've sat and I've watched it, and I watched, like, four in a row, and I just, you know, there was some things, there was this one bit in the zoo, was, the, one of the pandas need a panda mate, and so Vince gets, like, a panda costume and he has to go in and, you know, but it, and then then you look in and someone looks into the door, and they're having

a date, the panda [laughs], I mean I'm laughing now, it's funny when I'm talking about it.

[laughter]

Kate: Um and, but it wasn't, it just, like I just [frustrated high-pitched whisper] I wanted it to make me laugh, and it won't make me laugh!

Moderator: [interruption] Yeah.

Kate: And it's really really hard, and I just feel like I'm totally missing something with my friends, you know.

(Group seven, British male and female strangers, aged twenty-three to thirty-three)

Like Rachel, Cindy and Sarah, Kate here also emphasised the value attached to TV comedy talk within their friendship group. Group ten expressed disappointment when our discussion ended, and Kate reported that they had visited her afterwards and told her that they really enjoyed the experience. Kate herself worked in media production and was keen to analyse and discuss different programmes. This professional background could have positioned her as an 'expert' in her focus group. However, the other participants in group seven were not aware of her job, and while Kate was certainly an active contributor, she did not dominate the focus group discussion.

When talking about *The Might Boosh*, Kate could be seen to articulate an 'anti-fan' identity in which she displayed knowledge about the programme while reacting against it (Gray 2003: 71). She brought up the programme at several points in the discussion, once humorously adding: 'I'll try and get off the subject of *The Mighty Boosh*', and this pattern could be seen to stress the tension between her anti-fan identity and her unhappiness at feeling excluded from her friends' conversations. This occurrence demonstrates that the use of focus groups made up of strangers and the use of pre-existing groups can lead to different kinds of talk; if she had been a participant in group ten, Kate would have had to negotiate her friends' perspectives on this issue, but nobody in group seven challenged her account. This highlights the importance of considering the group context in such data analysis. Having examined descriptions of 'naturally occurring' talk that resembled the analytical discussions I encouraged in the focus groups, I will now move on to a very different form of talk.

### **Re-performing comedic dialogue**

Watching and talking about TV comedy also appeared to be significant activities for the British undergraduate students in group one. However, this friendship group valued a different kind of talk:

Michael: The ones we really like, we're not gonna have big discussions about them, but we will [pause] we'll just say little slogans from the

Dave: [interruption] Repeat jokes.



Michael: And repeat jokes and things like that.  
(Group one, British male and female friends, aged twenty to twenty-one)

Michael here suggested that he did not consider comedy shows as an appropriate topic for analysis or discussion, which demonstrates that the kind of conversations that I encouraged in the focus group was often very different from his talk outside of the research setting. As Mulkay suggests, it can be difficult to talk seriously about humour because 'humorous and serious discourse operate according to fundamentally different principles' (Mulkay 1988: 7). However, the re-performance of lines from comedic dialogue stays within the realm of humour (Mulkay 1988: 21). In this space, participants 'have temporarily abandoned the assumptions of the ordinary world and are responding to, registering and celebrating a world of discourse where interpretative duality is the basic principle and understandable incongruity the overriding aim' (Mulkay 1988: 37). I will now examine this practice in more detail.

In addition to Michael, three other men and six women claimed that they would not normally *discuss* TV comedy. However, like him, four of these participants said that they would recite lines from different shows. In total, thirteen women and eighteen men stated that they sometimes engaged in this kind of talk. Such quotations were not limited to the repetition of jokes, but included a variety of lines that were seen as particularly funny. This practice can be related to Jenkins' study of media fans. Applying de Certeau's (1984) concept of 'poaching', Jenkins (1992: 23) sees 'fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture'. Discussing texts with fellow viewers, or quoting humorous lines can be seen as such strategies of appropriation. In both cases, viewers 'poach' salient textual elements and bring them into social interactions, thereby extending the figured world of comedy viewing.

Jenkins (1992: 224) relates this concept to Bakhtin's notion of dialogue, emphasising that words are always partly 'borrowed' from their previous contexts, so that scriptwriters will also always be 'poachers'. As Bakhtin notes:

Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (Bakhtin 1992: 60)

More specifically, comedy quotations can also be related to Vološinov's (1973: 116) idea of 'reported speech', which 'is regarded by the speaker as an utterance belonging to *someone else*, an utterance that was originally totally independent, complete in its construction, and lying outside the given context'.

My focus group participants rarely offered any explanation for this particular kind of reported speech, but I prompted the Norwegian group sixteen to do so:

Moderator: Mmm. Um do you tend to talk to other people about comedy series that you have seen or heard about?

Karin: Yes.

Olav: [interruption] We might quote comedy series

Bjarte: [interruption] Yes.

Olav: or do quotes from a comedy series, [pause] like, a quote from a comedy series that kind of gets, like, 'do you remember that, that comment?'

Moderator: What kind of comments? Are there any particular ones, or anything?

Olav: *Friends* gets a few quotes.

[pause]

Moderator: Why do you do that?

[Laughter]

Olav: It is it is a quote that might say something [pause]

Bjarte: [interruption] In that setting.

Olav: Yes, in a certain setting with certain people, and that is so spot on for that situation. And that form or way of expressing yourself

Moderator: [interruption] Mmm.

Olav: which isn't normal, perhaps, in that setting.

(Group sixteen, Norwegian male and female friends and family members, aged twenty-six to thirty-nine)

This exchange highlights the tension embedded in academic research on TV comedy; while comedy quotations usually remain within the realm of humour, I here coaxed Olav (aged thirty-three) to analyse this talk in a serious mode. The participants first responded by laughing, which highlights their perception of this conflict, but also expectations based on norms around 'appropriate' talk in this pre-existing group of friends and family members. Despite this laughter, Olav attempted to adjust his answer in response to the research setting, and Bjarte ratified this approach by adding to Olav's explanation.

Comedy quotations can be usefully conceptualised as a particular 'speech genre' specific to the realm of humour: 'Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*' (Bakhtin 1992: 60). Drawing on this idea in his study of language use in Barcelona youth groups, Pujolar (2000: 31) notes that it facilitates an exploration of 'how language is embedded in the interactional processes where social reality is created'. In Olav's account, a line from a TV comedy show could provide him with a humorous comment on a specific social situation because he could draw on people's shared perception of the line's humorous function within the original text and its relevance to the current situation. As Gray (2006: 125) writes about *The Simpsons* viewers, 'the interpretive

community can bring together interpreting individuals to propose general, shared, and socially activated meanings'. However, while his study focuses on how *Simpsons* viewers "intellectualized" their viewing experience and were keen to discuss aspects of 'relevant and topical parody and political satire' (Gray 2006: 130-31), and Bailey (2005: 183) describes online *Futurama* fan talk as including 'extended discussions of the implied politics of the program', participants such as Michael, Dave and Olav focused primarily on the humorous aspect of talk.

The recital of lines from *Friends* in Olav's Norwegian friendship group required the adoption of a foreign language. This highlights the performative aspect of quoting lines from comedic dialogue, which has been discussed by Smith (1999) in relation to Monty Python fans:

Part of the fun (particularly for American audiences) is nailing the 'outrageous' accents of the Python troupe members. It is not simply enough to repeat lines from the film. Fans try to reperform the lines, mustering whatever impersonative vocal skills they have. (Smith 1999: 65)

The emphasis on performance can also be seen in the following extract from an all-female group, where the British participants described the practice of teenage viewers appropriating elements from Ricky Gervais's performance as David Brent in *The Office* (BBC2 2001-2003). This form of poaching is here partly constructed as masculine:

Heather: And the little, like, Brentisms. I think it always helps if you can take something from a comedy show and, like, act it out yourself.

Joanne: [interruption] Yeah.

Heather: Cos everyone then, like, fancies themselves, like, in school we used to have, like, all the boys would do David Brent, and they would do, like, loads of Brent things.

Joanne: [interruption] Like that dance that he did.

Heather: Yeah! Like, everyone was doing that! I think it helps if you can pick up and copy them.

(Group twenty-four, female friends, aged eighteen to nineteen)

In a group of male, British friends (group twelve), James (aged twenty-six) explicitly described the re-performance of comedic dialogue as a male speech genre, arguing: 'All male conversation's based on repeated comedy catch phrases. That's, isn't it? That's what we do'. James presented this argument as both a fact and a question that invited his friends to confirm his perspective. This gendered perception was also presented by British twenty-seven-year-old Rebecca in a group of female friends:

Rebecca: But I think it's more of a male thing. That they will [pause] men have this huge capacity to forget dates and everything else. But [pause]

Anna: [interruption] [inaudible]

Rebecca: [inaudible] and quotes from films.

Charlotte: Yeah.

Rebecca: They, you you go in after they have seen it once, and they'll be able to pretty much quote all the major lines

Anna: [interruption] Yeah,

Rebecca: And punch lines in comedy, after they have watched it once.

Charlotte: [inaudible]

Rebecca: I can never remember, no.

[pause]

Anna: But that's cos women can't tell jokes. Only blokes can tell jokes.

[Laughter]

Rebecca: That's rubbish!

[Laughter]

Anna: But that's it, the stereotype thing is that 'oh, women uh a woman can't tell a joke, and can't remember [inaudible]'

(Group four, British female friends, aged twenty-seven to forty-nine)

Rebecca here emphasised that men's capacity for memory was not superior *in general*, while still constructing the specific capacity for the recollection of lines as primarily a masculine trait. This particular kind of textual knowledge is described in Ott's (2003: 231) account of the *South Park* (Comedy Central 1997-present) cybercommunity, in which 'mastery of the text is demonstrated not through interpretation or analysis, but through detail and comprehensiveness'.

Rebecca gendered that particular competency as masculine, which can be related to the stereotype that 'the humor of women functions to create solidarity and build intimacy, while the humor of men functions as a form of status competition' (Crawford 2003: 1421). This gendered dichotomy of humour is closely associated with a gendered dichotomy of language, in which researchers have argued that 'women tend to be supportive in their conversational style; and men competitive' (Hay 2000: 710). Some friendship groups may certainly value the ability to recite lines, but, as Crawford (2003: 1422) maintains, 'characterizing men as interested only in status, and women only in solidarity, is simplistic and misleading, reminiscent of the much-criticized sex differences approach'.

In the extract given above, Rebecca's gendered argument was also challenged by thirty-nine-year-old Anna, who related the notion of women's inability to remember dialogue to the idea that they cannot tell jokes, thereby highlighting what she perceived to be an underlying assumption of masculine superiority in the realm of humour. This stereotype is discussed by Goodman (1992: 206-7), who argues that women have traditionally not been seen as joke-tellers, but as the butts of jokes. Anna presented her

challenge in the form of an ironic replication of this patriarchal view that simultaneously demonstrated intentional female production of humour. While Anna was actually contesting her friends' gendered discourse, this critique was 'softened' by the use of humour. As Holmes (2007: 21) notes, humour 'makes it possible to "do" both power and politeness'. The recognition of Anna's partly humorous intention was also immediately displayed by the other participants' laughter. Rebecca's serious response ('That's rubbish!') then facilitated Anna's shift from humour to 'serious discourse' (Mulkay 1988: 23). Building on her ironic remark, Anna then explicitly highlighted that humour has been defined as a masculine sphere, which demonstrates that 'the humorous mode does not necessarily mean that the utterance in question is without serious intent or devoid of serious implications' (Mulkay 1988: 3).

Anna's use of irony can be conceptualised as 'double-voiced discourse' (Bakhtin 1987: 324). Writing about the novel, Bakhtin argues that double-voiced discourse 'serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author'. Incorporating this concept into her feminist perspective, Little describes a dialogic tension between a woman's voice and 'the language and worldview of the patriarchal structure in which she lives' (Little 1991: 19). She argues that, by parodying or mimicking 'the voice of authority and power', women's 'double-voiced discourse relativizes the social and political hierarchies implicit in the teased (male-enunciated) ideology'.

Across the focus groups, only a minority of participants constructed the re-performance of comedic dialogue as masculine. However, it is worth noting that no-one presented it as a feminine practice. This suggests the existence of two main 'interpretative repertoires' (Edley 2001: 201) circulating among my participants; one of which did not gender this kind of talk, and one of which gendered it as masculine. My analysis of participant accounts of 'naturally occurring' TV comedy talk has begun to consider examples of humorous discourse in the focus groups. I will now take a closer look at the ways in which participants negotiated group dynamics and undermined the serious discourse of academic research through the use of banter.

### **Banter and group boundaries**

Banter can function to draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them', to regulate behaviour, and to reinforce the status of the humorist (Hay 2000: 716). This particular form of competitive and sometimes contestive conjoint humour was widespread in focus groups based on pre-existing groups of friends, family members and colleagues. In contrast, groups made up of strangers were far more likely to adopt 'positive politeness humor' (Holmes and Marra 2002: 70), which primarily served to construct and maintain a friendly atmosphere. As Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006: 69) note: 'Humor targeting participants, as well as humor targeting the speaker, have an added risk of a factual interpretation as an insult or as a confessional disclosure'. This possibility is greater in groups of strangers, where participants

lack some of the contextual knowledge that may be needed to interpret humour in the way it was intended.

An example of a competitive humour style can be identified in the following extract from a group of male Norwegian friends in their twenties:

Moderator: Do any of you go on the Internet and chat to people about comedy on message boards or in chat rooms, for example?

[participants shaking their heads]

Stian: I think Kristoffer does, but he won't admit it.

[laughter]

Rune: Everybodylovesraymond.com

[laughter]

Kristoffer: I made that web site.

(Group fourteen, Norwegian male friends, aged twenty-three to twenty-four)

The participants' humorous responses to this question worked as a temporary break from the 'serious' discourse encouraged by the focus group setting (Holmes and Marra 2002: 68). Here, Stian and Rune used competitive humour targeted at Kristoffer. This humour functioned as a 'boundary marker' (Schnurr 2008: 312) to identify unacceptable practices (online interaction with other comedy viewers) and tastes (liking *Everybody Loves Raymond*, CBS, 1996-2005). Through such competitive humour:

... Participants compete for the floor, vying with each other to produce witty, amusing contributions to the on-going interaction. These sequences of jointly constructed humor often involve a number of one-off quips or witty one-liners, which are relatively loosely semantically linked and often have a 'competitive' edge. (Holmes 2006: 37-38)

Kristoffer's ironic verification and exaggeration of his friends' claims could be seen to reinforce his position as a group member by demonstrating his confidence in his own compliance with established boundaries. As Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006: 53) observe, 'the experience of jointly playing with ideas allows interactants to show that they have similar attitudes and beliefs towards the objects of the play, and as a result, to reinforce the personal bonds between them'. However, such interaction would be trickier to manage in groups of strangers, where the risk of miscommunication is greater.

The competitive style of humour adopted in the exchange above was characteristic of many other exchanges in group fourteen. Thus, in addition to the promotion of solidarity, this style of discourse could also be seen to indicate ongoing negotiations of status within this group. As Hay (2000: 716) notes, humour in social interactions necessarily involves power as well as solidarity: 'Whenever you attempt humor and it succeeds, your status

within the group is positively affected. You have amused the audience and so illustrated that you share with them a common idea of what is funny'. Competitive humour is clearly linked to this idea of status, and examining the use of collaborative and competitive humour can help focus group researchers make sense of some aspects of group dynamics.

Another example of norm-maintaining banter can be seen at the start of the session in a British group of male friends. The participants had been asked to state their name, as well as the title of one TV comedy series that they liked, and one that they disliked. This was intended as a warm-up activity:

Jack: Hello! I'm Jack and I like *Spaced* [Channel 4, 1999-2001]. And I don't like *My Hero* [BBC One, 2000-2006].

[laughter]

Jack: Or *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps* [BBC2 / BBC Choice / BBC Three, 2001-present].

[Because participants are talking over each other, the recording is only partially comprehensible, but Tim here stated that he liked *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps*]

Ed: Oh fuck off!

[inaudible]

Tim: Oh come on!

Jack: It's shite!

Tim: Am I the only person here who likes that?

Ed: No, you don't! Oh god!

Tim: [laughs]

Ed: And what's even worse is you've admitted it.

Tim: [laughs]

Ed: On tape!

Tim: [laughing] I've said it and it's recorded!

(Group six, British male friends, aged twenty-five to thirty-six)

This exchange can be related to Kehily and Nayak's (1997: 73) description of ritualised insult competitions in which male pupils had to display dominant masculinity by reacting to any insult with apparent indifference. Such competitions, then, 'have the effect of creating clear-cut masculine identities, crystallising who is "hard" or "soft" through the public exposition of power and vulnerability'. Pujolar's ethnographic study of two youth groups in Barcelona also notes that ritualised sex-themed insults were 'constitutive of a particular discourse of masculinity' that functioned both to maintain group boundaries, and 'to construct a space of creativity'. Drawing on Bakhtin, he conceptualises this as an ongoing dialogue, in which 'the same themes were adopted and always adapted to produce new effects' in terms of aggression and humour (Pujolar 2000: 48-9). However, Pujolar (2000: 99) also highlights the use of self-deprecating humour in the negotiation of less conventional

masculine identities. In the exchange from group six, Ed and Jack targeted Tim with rather aggressive insults because his tastes in TV comedy were seen to transgress group norms. However, while these accusations were not clearly cued as humorous, Tim attempted to resolve the conflict by absorbing the insults; he laughed, and acknowledged his transgression through self-deprecating humour ('I've said it and it's recorded!').

As Hay (2000: 738) emphasises, both men and women 'indulge in teasing humor'. Women's use of banter in the focus groups can be illustrated by the following example from a group of female friends:

Mette: Oh my God, you like *Joey*! That's the worst thing I watch.

Sissel: [Laughs] It is really funny!

Tone: And *Step by Step*, that's really awful! [Laughs]

[Laughter]

Mette: Yes, then I turn the TV off.

[Laughter]

Tone: We've got different types of humour here.

(Group seventeen, Norwegian female friends, aged twenty to twenty-five)

The group here failed to reach consensus through banter, and Tone instead glossed over their differences by proposing that they were produced by individual 'types of humour'. As Crawford (1995: 35) argues, this idea works to essentialise humour preferences 'as a stable trait'. Hay (2000: 720-21) notes that mutual teasing and insults can be a permitted part of many friendships, in which case such humour can work to express solidarity. However, she also notes that it might be difficult for researchers to distinguish between power-related banter and permitted teasing. In analysing the previous focus group extract, it is impossible to fully establish whether Mette and Tone's criticisms were intended and interpreted as insulting or as solidarity-building teasing within an established 'joking culture' (Fine and De Soucey 2005: 2), although their laughter could be seen as an attempt to keep the interaction within the 'play frame' (Holmes 2007: 11) of humour. Such ambiguity is certainly a limitation of focus group research around humour and comedy, but could also complicate data analysis focusing on other topics.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the enormous popularity of numerous screen comedies, audience engagement with such texts has so far received very little academic attention. This article contributes to debates around TV comedy by considering how audiences talk about such texts within focus groups and outside of the research context. It also underlines the importance of reflecting on methodological issues in audience studies based on focus group research. One key aspect considered here was the privileging of analytical talk in my focus groups. Reflecting on the ways in which participants responded to the research setting, I examined the contrast between their descriptions of 'naturally occurring' TV comedy talk and the



sustained discussion promoted by moderators. This tension between the ‘seriousness’ of academia and the humorous discourse of comedy is something that future research on comedy producers and comedy audiences should examine further. My analysis here has highlighted different ways in which participants negotiated and resisted academic seriousness within the focus groups. Demonstrating that some participants claimed to value analytical talk also outside of the research setting, I argued that it was sometimes seen as an enjoyable way to extend audience engagement beyond the moment of reception. However, other viewers privileged talk that remained within the realm of humour. This included the re-performance of comedic dialogue, which I have seen as a playful and solidarity-building practice. Participants attached different value to TV comedy talk, but some constructed it as a significant element of audience engagement. This underlines the importance of considering how ‘the performance of audience exceeds the time-space of engagement and overflows unpredictably into the process of living’ (Nightingale 1996: 95).

The second key issue I examined was the potential impact of group dynamics on the focus group data. My analysis suggested that participants who had never met before tended to be more careful in their negotiations, because they had yet to establish norms and boundaries for appropriate tastes and behaviour. I also presented the example of Kate (group 7), who were able to share negative experiences from her friendship group in a more ‘neutral’ environment. However, most of my focus groups were based on pre-existing groups of friends, family members and colleagues. The analysis considered how participants negotiated different perspectives in such groups, and, in particular, I looked at how individual group members used banter and other forms of humorous discourse to articulate ideas and negotiate group positions. Noting the difficulty in assessing the intentions and interpretations of such interaction, I have underlined that humour is ‘an important and flexible discursive resource’ (Holmes 2007: 21) in the negotiation of moderator/participant and participant/participant relationships in focus groups. This also makes it a significant challenge in the analysis of focus group data, and an issue that requires further exploration in future research.

### **Biographical Note:**

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> This research was carried out for the author's doctoral thesis, which was supervised by Matt Hills and funded by ORSAS and the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.

<sup>2</sup> While my two case study countries are geographically close, there are significant differences between them, including population size, demographic heterogeneity and international power status (Syvertsen 1992). However, for the purpose of comparing audience engagement with TV

comedy, these two national contexts were interesting because audiences shared familiarity with some of the same British and US programming. The Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK imports a great deal of British programming, while US productions are also widely available in both case study countries.